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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the school district's role in implementing Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). Research shows that effective district support for CSR varies from district to district. This is due, in part, to the fact that many prior models bypassed the district, operating under the belief that reform would be more effective if it targeted individual schools. Reformers now know that district support is an important component of CSR. Such support becomes essential when CSR models try to assume some of the traditional roles of districts, such as professional development and curriculum support. A district's role in reform can take many different forms, ranging from an ideological commitment to policy components. Most important, districts can institutionalize change and empower schools to make decisions. Such decision-making can be particularly important since mandated reforms often disappear when new leadership in a school takes over. However, when reforms are generated by the schools, then staff members are more willing to make the program succeed. Such cooperation is also important when addressing the continual training of district professionals. Meshing a CSR model's professional-development plan with an extant district plan can be challenging, and a district's cooperation is essential to ensure that gaps in the development plans do not emerge. (RJM)

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Research Brief

The Need for District Support for School Reform: What the Researchers Say

Deborah Appelbaum

February 2002

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NCCSR
The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform

Research Brief

THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

The Need for District Support for School Reform: What the Researchers Say

by Deborah Appelbaum

Questions Addressed in This Brief:

- *What does research say about the need for district support for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR)?*
- *How can districts support schools' professional development plans?*
- *What specific studies address the district role in CSR?*

Introduction

Research on the importance of district support for successful comprehensive school reform (CSR) implementation and sustainability is compelling. What effective support looks like varies from district to district, and often depends on the number and variety of CSR programs within the district. Some districts are undertaking multiple reforms; other districts are implementing a single model across several schools; while still others are implementing a single CSR model in one school. In any scenario, however, researchers view district support as key for the survival of the reform.

How Do Models Involve Districts?

Many models bypassed districts in the past, believing it more efficient and effective to work directly with individual schools. Over the past several years, however, this relationship has evolved. Most model developers learned through the research or their own experience that sustainability is dependent on district support. Amanda Datnow of the University of Toronto said, "Design teams are realizing that they really do need to work work closely with districts or at least secure district support."

Some models prescribe roles for the district. Onward to Excellence II, for example, involves districts in coordinating schools' professional development and providing data to schools. Other models, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools and School Development Program, choose to work with entire districts rather than isolated schools.

Evolving Roles of Districts

In some cases, comprehensive school reform has caused a shift in the district's role. The support models offer may replace a role the district has traditionally played, such as providing professional development and curriculum support. Carving out a new role for the district when models provide these services can be a challenge, researchers say. It can be equally challenging for districts to focus on a particular school if the rest of the schools in the district are implementing other programs.

Bari Anhalt Erlichson of Rutgers is studying the experiences of eighty-six schools in nine different districts in New Jersey implementing seven different school reform models. She says that while schools can make progress on their own, and "can change much about who they are and what they do," these changes "can't be institutionalized without a supportive role from the district."

Different Facets of Support

The district role in reform has many different aspects, including an "ideological commitment" as well as "financial, political, and policy components" according to Datnow. In particular, researchers point to important roles for district staff in empowering schools to make decisions, including model selection, supporting professional development, mediating relationships with model developers, and insuring that staff at the school level are not detracting from reform.

The research on district involvement is quite compelling on the issue of mandated versus school-generated reforms. When reforms have been mandated, they often disappear when new leadership takes over, and school staff is often very resistant to change. In contrast, when school staff "buy in" to a particular reform, it is easier to maintain momentum. When a reform hits a stumbling block, for example, staff are more willing to sustain their hard work if the program is something they selected. Also, it is vital that schools are empowered to make their own decisions over issues such as staffing, scheduling, and planning time.

One critical role is supporting or providing professional development. While professional development is usually a central piece of what model developers provide, the designs do not provide this service in every academic and administrative area. In districts where successful implementation occurred, district staff understood what the design could and could not provide and "filled in" the gaps by providing the services the model did not. Also, Erlichson said, "Districts have worked to align professional development with the core principles

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of the models and provide content as well as instructional techniques that are consistent with the model." Finding adequate time and resources for this training, however, can be a challenge to schools. Districts with successful implementation have provided ample professional development days and have found creative ways to fund the training.

After the initial training has taken place, there are many roles for the districts in supporting ongoing improvement. Some districts train central office staff to serve as facilitators or "change agents" to help schools maintain momentum by motivating teachers and working with those who are resistant. Another important role is to help schools negotiate with developers and hold them accountable. For example, some supportive districts have negotiated changes in teacher contracts to lengthen the school day and provide more common planning time. In other cases, districts have "demanded fourth and fifth years at no additional money because they don't feel like the developers lived up to their contracts," according to Erlichson.

As a school is turning itself around, often the most supportive role a district can play is to provide schools waivers from district-mandated programs. Many models may incorporate alternative methods of achieving district and state goals. Once a school has galvanized staff, energy and resources around a common goal, many supportive districts have allowed schools with alternative professional development programs or assessments to be exempted from some district requirements.

Challenges and Questions for the Future

In some districts, according to Sam Stringfield of Johns Hopkins University, comprehensive school reform programs have difficulty attracting attention from district representatives when there are other district-wide programs being implemented. It is often easier for district staff to have all schools implementing the same program with the same accountability measures.

What is not yet clear from the research is what role the district will take when federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program funds or other funding for reforms run out. Will reforms eventually fade, or will districts jump in to support the effort?

Supporting Research

Necessary District Support for Comprehensive School Reform. Susan Bodilly and Mark Berends (1998).
http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups/civilrights/conferences/title/drafts/bodilly_berends.html

Working Together for Reliable School Reform. Amanda Datnow and Sam Stringfield. Article originally appeared in volume 5 (1&2) of the Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR), 2000.
http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/change/working.htm

What Works: Researchers on the District Role and CSR

- Remove competing programs and requirements
- Empower schools to make decisions
- Assist schools in the model selection process
- Build links between state standards and accountability measures, the district curriculum, and the individual models
- Create a network of schools doing the same or like-minded reforms so schools can share lessons learned
- Research and understand the models selected in the district
- Assist schools in gathering and using data
- Provide each school with district level liaisons who understand the model
- Hold the model providers accountable
- Help schools understand budget implications of the model

This brief is the product of conversations over a two day period with the Network of Researchers, the principal investigators of CSR studies. This group met October 25 — 26, 2001, in Washington, D.C.

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The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) collects and disseminates information that builds the capacity of schools to raise the academic achievement of all students. This is accomplished by continuously examining the literature related to CSR, adding high quality materials to the databases and actively sending useful information to educators and policy makers at the local, state, and national levels. Through its web site, reference and retrieval services, and publications, NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR.

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